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Dancing for AID: Poetry in Motion



Bharatnatyam exponent Padmashri ALARMEL VALLI unveils the secrets behind the rhyme and rhythm of her performances.

By ALKA ROY

"I believe my art is greater than I am, always will be. In one lifetime I cannot even begin to comprehend the profound breadth and depth of this art form. So, I feel really humble about it."

Alarmel Valli

"Isn't she lovely?" "I haven't seen a performer of this caliber in years." The compliments rolled off the tongues of the audience with much the same vibrancy that the dancer had shown just minutes earlier.

It was Sunday, May 4th at the Roswell Cultural Arts Center, and the electrifying impact had been created by one of India's youngest Padmashri Bharatnatyam dancers, Alarmel Valli from Chennai. The occasion ? the Spring Fundraiser of the Atlanta Chapter of Association of India's Development (A.I.D.).

Year after year, audiences come to see Ms. Valli perform the traditional form of Bharatnatyam in her fresh and poetic style. Whether in India or Europe, where she tours often, her shows are always sold-out in advance.

Atlanta was no different. The show started right on time and was most professionally run. Ms. Valli would not have had it any other way. She left the stage before starting the Varnam to allow latecomers time to "settle-down."

And they did! From the moment this petite dancer began, she held the audience in rapt attention, entrancing them with every flip of her wrist, each tap of her feet. Her movements were brisk yet sensual. Playful yet full of purpose. It was a most riveting rendition of the Pandanallur tradition of Bharatnatyam.

Ms. Valli, who was groomed by Sri Subbaraya Pillai from the age of 16, moves across the stage as if dancing is the most natural way to do so. Her study of other dance styles like Odissi under Gurus Kelucharan Mohapatra and Ramani Ranjan Jena and music under Smt. T. Muktha has made her extremely versatile. She has received numerous awards including the Sangeet Natak Academy award and the

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Padmashri from the President of India in 1991.

The first half of her performance included traditional Bharatnatyam items, followed by a short presentation by A.I.D. volunteers. They emphasized the need to focus on development in India, especially on sustainable growth, literacy, women's empowerment, health care and the environment.

Later, Ms. Valli engaged the audience with her interpretations of the rich and powerful poetry of the Tamil Sangam era, which she has been working with for the past thirteen years. Her articulate descriptions before each dance, the beauty of the poetry and the stories that she wove around them were mesmerizing. There was a dance about water and its representation of the cycle of life, which left the audience feeling drenched. Another evoked the stark image of the desert, telling the story of a mother whose heart is broken because her daughter has eloped with a stranger, and her struggle against the bitterness that arises from her loss and pain.

Ms. Valli was accompanied by C.K. Vasudevan on cymbals, Sakthivel? Muruganathan on mridangam and the young Ms. Akkarai Subhalakshmi on violin. Gomathi Nayagam sang vocals. After the show, she sat down to talk about her approach to art and life.

How has it been performing in the U.S.?

The poor infrastructure for [Indian] arts and lack of a sense of professionalism are some of the drawbacks here. So, I was in Dallas earlier, in Atlanta now, going to Austin, then to Canada and back again to Raleigh, North Carolina. I am constantly drawing attention to the number of suitcases, vans and travel schedules. I don't think artistes should be stuck with doing that.

But I really like the fact that the audience is not pretentious. The love, the warmth and the absolute adoration that you receive from people here also attracts me.

What, according to you, makes Indian classical dance special?

At a seminar in India, a well-known German dancer asked why Indian dancers are so happy all the time. I could turn around and ask them the same question? why their faces are so wooden or there is not as much footwork? There are some people who feel threatened by what they can't understand. Indian dance is so multilayered, so complex that they would like it to be simplified and not just demystified.

We should move with our times and to our cultural beat, but we should have art that can communicate. And I speak with the conviction that our classical arts can communicate across linguistic and cultural barriers. This is my experience wherever I have danced.

Don't you think that the classical dancers who live in the U.S. or have grown up here would approach the art differently?

Absolutely. I am speaking as an Indian dancer and not as a dancer from the Diaspora because I know your considerations and your pressures here are very different. My problem is not with anyone approaching this art differently as long as it comes from within. My problem is about imposition of a western aesthetic on India. There are so many layers of evolution of this dance form. Just pick the music, understand the Gamakas, the kas, the pause in the music. Then feel it and translate it into dance movements or the mathematics of the movement. It is such a vast and profound field. And finally there is the intense spirituality that influences whatever you do.

My art for me is not so much about political correctness but about human correctness. It's about allowing the soul to glow and lift one out of the mire and the muck in which we find ourselves groveling each day. I don't want to keep groveling, I want to learn from it and rise above it.

Is that what attracted you to Sangam poetry?

The potential of Sangam is amazing. The subtlety, the sophistication of the civilization of two thousand years ago and their feeling for nature is incredible. We

call ourselves environmentalists. These people knew every leaf, every blade of grass, every flower that bloomed there and they had such tenderness, such a sense of observation. There's such a wealth of poetry in our culture. We don't work enough with poets.

You were articulate, yet serious while introducing each dance and yet playful and smiling while performing. So which is the real Valli?

[laughs] I can be both. I think one's true personality emerges when you dance. A good dancer is one who cannot wear a mask while she dances. When I got married, people asked me why don't you talk about your personal life. I said, 'when we dance we expose our souls in a sense, so we need some space to ourselves'. In a dance, all that's best in me emerges. And when I speak, I am serious because I believe in austerity and am a serious person too.

You have established yourself as one of the topmost Bharatnatyam dancers. What next?

I take things one day at a time. As my life evolves and as I grow as a person, my dance grows too. I don't have a five-year, nine-year plan. But, I think a lot about my students. I stopped teaching nine years ago and regretted it. So, I started again. I enjoy group choreography and would like to work with my students, not just perform myself.

Is there anything about you that may surprise dance lovers?

I think that my very appearance comes as a shock. I don't look like a dancer and I don't act like one. What else? I love hiking, I love mountains and I love reading, especially mysteries. I loved "The Lord of Rings"; I bought the DVD this time. I have a lot of interests. Huh, I don't know if this will surprise people, but as I get older, I have learnt to break away from the grind of the dancing world.

For more information on the artist, visit www.alarmelvalli.com. For details on the development work of A.I.D., Atlanta: www.aidindia.org/Atlanta

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